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AUTHOR Harris, Allatia; Hosseini, Shyrel
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ABSTRACT

Celebrating diversity is critical for maximizing the benefits of the diverse makeup of faculty, students, and communities served by colleges. Understanding the importance of diversity is important for academic leaders because their attitudes towards diversity influence the perceptions of others in the institution and can affect hiring practices and curricular decisions. Moreover, as managers, academic leaders are required to be responsive to customer (i.e., student) needs, especially those related to resolving faculty and student conflicts involving prejudice. An atmosphere which celebrates diversity is an atmosphere which encourages individuality as well as group cohesion. A model for reducing prejudice, developed by the National Coalition Building Institute and known as "Welcoming Diversity," can provide college leaders with an effective multicultural training model. The premise of the workshop is that bridges are built on pride, not guilt. The first half of the workshop celebrates the participants' differences and acknowledges common experiences, examining different prejudices and allowing participants to examine their experiences as victims of prejudice. The second half of the workshop personalizes prejudice and offers a proactive method for countering prejudicial remarks, slurs, and jokes. Workshop participants achieve a closeness based on mutual understanding, concern, and a common purpose. (TGI)

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WELCOMING DIVERSITY:

CELEBRATING OUR DIFFERENCES AND ACKNOWLEDGING OUR COMMON EXPERIENCES

By

Allatia Harris
Dean, Communications
Mountain View College
Dallas, TX
and
Shyrel Hosseini
Dean
Front Range Community College
Westminster, CO

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ALLATIA HARRIS

Allatia Harris is Dean of the Communications Division at Mountain View College in Dallas, Texas. A Professor of Speech Communication at Mountain View College since 1978, she was appointed to the dean's chair in 1994. She is a native Dallasite who received her Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts Degrees from North Texas State University in Speech Communication. She continued her graduate studies at the University of Southern California, also in Speech Communication. In 1991, she participated in diversity leadership training with the National Coalition Building Institute (based in Washington D.C.), and she has remained an active member of the North Texas Chapter of NCBI since that time. She frequently conducts diversity training/prejudice reduction workshops for student and faculty groups, civic organizations and churches, and private industry. She has chaired the Mountain View College Multicultural Committee since 1992. In 1993 she was recognized by her college as Innovator of the Year for her work with multicultural issues in the classroom and her college community. Allatia attended the Institute for Academic Leadership Development, 1994-1995.

She lives in Seagoville, Texas, with her husband and teenaged son.

Welcoming Diversity: Celebrating Our Differences and Acknowledging Our Common Experiences

One goal of the 60's and 70's was to prove our equality. The research of the 90's underscores that we are quite different. Men and women communicate differently; blacks and whites perceive the news differently; today's students and today's professors have different expectations of the classroom. We must learn to value these differences while acknowledging our common experiences.
Are our differences, as some naysayers bandy, tearing our nation apart? Why can't we all just get along? Forget diversity or celebrate diversity?

We are not all alike. The civil rights marchers of the sixties worked to provide equal opportunities for us all, to insure equal protection under the law for us all, but they knew we were not all alike. In Dr. King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech, he refers to a future in which children of all colors hold hands. One beauty of that speech is that Dr. King specifically acknowledges the differences among the children who some day will hold hands to share the future of this country. Those children named in this famous speech are children of former slaves and former slave owners, of sharecroppers, and so on; he notes differences of economics and of race. The beauty of the vision lies in the many different groups represented by those who join together in the celebration of a common future.

Major diversity issues concern differences of race, gender, sexual orientation, class background, and religion. These are the diversity issues that frighten many of us. A common complaint heard during the 90's is that many have taken "this diversity stuff" too far. A student is a student, regardless of race, gender, or background. Each student, however, is aware of herself/himself as Native American or Caucasian, male or female, local or international. Her/His perception of the classroom is necessarily affected by these aspect of his experience of the world prior to his entry into that classroom. A poor white female who has experienced the world through blue eyes perceives her educational experience differently than a wealthy international student from Nigeria who has perceived a very different world through brown eyes.

But diversity - and our ability to celebrate diversity - extends beyond these rather obvious differences. Diversity issues also involve those of us who regularly "surf the Net" and those who miss the old card catalogue in the library. Those of us in liberal arts differ from those in the natural sciences. Administrators (!) experience the college (and students) differently than support staff and faculty. And full-time faculty serve students differently than adjunct faculty do. We have different learning styles, different teaching styles, different communication styles. Students of the nineties differ from students of the eighties.

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Must our differences divide us? ABSOLUTELY NOT! But attempting to deny our differences **MAY** divide us. The solution is to **CELEBRATE OUR DIVERSITY**. We can learn to appreciate our differences and to learn from our differences. We can learn to benefit from viewing the world (or any given situation) through a variety of perspectives rather than any individual's necessarily limited view.

A model for learning to maximize the benefits of the diverse makeup or our work groups, our student populations, and our communities is described in the following pages. The "Celebrating Diversity" session at the NCCCA conference will include discussions of issues of diversity which face the academic leader in the learning institution of the nineties.

WHY DISCUSS CELEBRATING DIVERSITY IN A SESSION FOR ACADEMIC LEADERS?

1. As academic leaders, our attitudes toward diversity influence the perceptions of those around us. As faculty, our attitudes towards other groups affect our students' understanding and respect for other groups. When our attitudes are positive and we appreciate the benefits of applying an inclusive perspective to our world view, we seek to correct under representations of groups which so often occur in existing textbooks. We seek out teaching materials and activities which more accurately represent the many groups which constitute our society.

2. As chairs and deans, our attitudes towards diversity affects our hiring practices and curricula decisions. Do we actively recruit new adjunct and full-time faculty who reflect the make-up of our student populations? When we celebrate, rather than "manage" diversity, we recognize the benefits of a diverse faculty to our students, to our programs, to our staff development, and to our institutions.

3. As managers we are required to be responsive to customer needs. As a dean, one of my primary responsibilities is to mediate faculty/student conflicts. What I discovered during my first year as dean was that nearly **every** student complaint I received had race or gender as at least one issue of the complaint. In some cases, I believe the student's complaint was valid; in others, the problem may have been the student's perception. In either situation, the prejudice was real to the student. The academic leader who "celebrates" diversity is comfortable with complaints of prejudice and can help the student sort through a "perceived" instance of prejudice or can help the faculty member address her/his problem and work on correcting real prejudices.

4. An atmosphere which "celebrates" diversity is an atmosphere which encourages individuality as well as group cohesion. Such an atmosphere allows each individual to feel respected and valued for herself/himself as well as valued for a part of the groups of which the individual belongs. Every member of the workgroup increases her or his world view and seeks input from those who might have different perspectives.

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"Welcoming Diversity"

The National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI) was founded in the early 1980's and is based in Washington D.C. The NCBI prejudice reduction model, "Welcoming Diversity," was developed by Cherie Brown. The first "Welcoming Diversity," workshop was developed and used with college students at a Boston area university to mediate problems between Black and Jewish student groups. The model was next used with groups of students at a Boston junior high school where racial problems were intensifying. Since 1984, the model has been used in schools and universities across the United States. The model has now also been used with employees of several major corporations as well as in some government agencies in the United States. The NCBI workshop has been used internationally as well, as NCBI representatives have been called to the Middle East, Ireland, South Africa, and Great Britain to mediate disputes.

The NCBI model was first brought to Texas in 1990 by administrators at the University of North Texas as they sought a program to facilitate the multicultural needs of their university family. UNT invited representatives of the Dallas County Community College District to participate in the workshop. The workshop was so well received that Cherie Brown was invited to return to Texas to establish an NCBI affiliate group and to train associates to conduct "Welcoming Diversity" workshops in this part of the United States.

The premise of the "Welcoming Diversity" workshop is that bridges are built on pride, not guilt. Our prejudices are most often based on responses to "recordings" we were given as children or on isolated encounters with people of groups other than our own. Prejudice is not based on rational thought. Nor is prejudice innate. We were not born with prejudices; we were given them. The workshop, then, does not seek to blame any group nor to shame any individuals. The NCBI model offers a way for individuals to examine their prejudiced "recordings" and to free themselves of those beliefs.

The first half of "Welcoming Diversity" celebrates our differences and acknowledges our common experiences. All groups are valued in this workshop. No group's experiences are discounted. The NCBI model examines the prejudices associated not only with racism but also with differences of age, class, sex, physical handicaps, learning disabilities, and sexual orientation. This workshop allows participants to see that we have all been victims of prejudice, our own and that of other groups. Participants are invited to feel good about their own groups, and from that position, to build bridges with other groups.

The second half of the workshop personalizes prejudice and offers a proactive method for countering prejudicial remarks, slurs, and jokes. First, selected individuals in the group share a personal experience with prejudice and the impact it had on them. This portion of the workshop personalizes prejudice for all members of the workshop. Participants are then taught a proactive method to interrupt racial remarks, which focuses on erasing negative recordings, rather than shaming the individuals who make such slurs

or remarks. This piece of the workshop enables each participant to achieve small personal victories over prejudice.

The NCBI model is a positive and bonding approach to an issue which typically divides groups. Workshop participants achieve a closeness based on mutual understanding, concern, and a common purpose. This is a high energy workshop which utilizes participatory experiential learning. The theory which is introduced is incorporated into activities and put into practice immediately while the workshop leaders are available to facilitate. The workshop is flexible to allow groups to work on prejudices which directly affect the participants.

This workshop is most effective when used with a diverse group of participants. An effort should be made to include people of different races, job classifications, ages, etc. Groups are most effective when numbering 30 - 40 participants. An off-campus or out-of-workplace location is preferable. The morning session of the workshop lasts roughly three hours and twenty minutes. The afternoon session lasts about two hours and thirty minutes. It is important that participants attend all of the workshop with the same group. Participants have a morning and afternoon break with an hour break for lunch. Ideally, participants dine together for lunch.

While there are a number of models available for multicultural training, this model is especially uplifting. An NCBI belief is, "Guilt is the glue which holds prejudice in place." By diminishing shame and guilt and by building pride, diverse groups come together with a better appreciation of how alike we really are and how much we learn and grow because we are diverse.

Anyone interested in learning more about NCBI or anyone interested in having a workshop conducted at her/his institution may contact Allatia Harris or Dianne Berg at the addresses listed below. "Train the Trainer" is also available through the NCBI National Chapter. This training lasts three days and includes the workshop described here. Participants are trained to lead the NCBI workshop in their institutions and are encouraged to form their own groups to reinforce the celebration of diversity.

Allatia Harris
Mountain View College
4849 W. Illinois
Dallas, TX 75211

Dianne Berg
UNT Human Resources
P.O. Box 13497
Denton, TX 76203